

PIGS GOTTA FLYMay 20, 2002Joseph S. Stern, Jr.

Remember the Big Pig Gig - a public art initiative celebrating Cincinnati Porkopolis past and how enthusiastically it was received? "Chicago has it's cows, we have our pigs and we're proud of them" was a summation of the event in the summer of 2000. Remember the Flying Pig Marathon, the brainchild of Bob Coughlin? It started out in 1997 as the Cincinnati Marathon and received mild support, but when the name was changed, it became an overnight success - one of the premier marathons in the country. Remember when people who don't know Cincinnati, upon being introduced to a native, would exclaim "Oh, you're from that pig place"? Remember when City Council felt that the "pig" appellation was degrading?

Well, there is a Cincinnati mystique about the pigs and its story is worth telling. Let's begin at the beginning.

From the time of the first settlements in the late 1700's, the fertile land around Cincinnati grew bumper crops of corn, but corn never became a major export. It was bulky and difficult to haul to market over rutted, muddy roads. The answer was to persuade the corn to walk to market on it's own four legs, squealing and grunting through the streets of the town.

Farmers used surplus corn to raise hogs and drive them into town to be slaughtered. An infant and crude meat packing industry was developing. But there was no good way to cure the meat until 1810 when Richard Fosdick, an enterprising Cincinnati, discovered a rock salt process for curing pork, which became the cornerstone of a slaughtering and packing business that has given employment to thousands of Cincinnati workers ever since. Pork packing grew fast. In 1819 27,600

pounds of pickled bacon and ham were produced. By 1826 many abattoirs were clustered along Deer Creek (Eggleston Avenue). That year 40,000 hogs were processed and packed. But with the opening of the Miami-Erie Canal, July 21, 1825, canal boats began to bring in natural ice from creek ponds. Packers could then store fresh meat in cold rooms, some 80 feet below street level. (Later on mechanical refrigerating plants became necessary - and today electrical, but artificial ice is still used in railroad cars and trucks.)

Deer Creek became a red, stinking cesspool. Citizens complained so vigorously that many abattoirs moved up the canal to Brighton Corner (Brighton and Central Parkway) and even further up the Mill Creek Valley.

Mrs. Frances Trollope came to Cincinnati in 1829. In her book Domestic Manners of the Americans she vented her spleen. "I should have liked Cincinnati better if the people had not dealt so very largely in hogs. . .If I determined to walk up Main Street the chances were 500 to 1 against my reaching the shady side without brushing by a snout fresh dripping from the kennel. . .Near a stream from the pig slaughtering house we were greeted with odors that I will not describe which I hope my readers cannot imagine. . .Our feet on leaving the city literally got entangled in pig's tails and jaw bones. . ."

But the industry grew rapidly. In 1840 local abattoirs processed over 300,000 pounds of dressed pork. By 1850 Cincinnati was the principal hog market and pork packing center in the world, greater than Cork and Belfast Ireland. The principal reason was its location, the center of the Ohio Valley, the great grain growing and hog raising region. And by 1850 the abattoirs had moved away from smelly Deer Creek in downtown Cincinnati to Brighton Corner in the suburbs - on the Miami Canal where present day Central Parkway connects with Colerain Avenue. Before the Civil War

there were 33 large pork and beef packers clustered around Brighton.

An outgrowth of the slaughter houses was the development of the candle and soap making industries which used its by-products - fats and carcasses from which thick grease was extracted. This was how Procter and Gamble started in 1837 in a small rented shop at Sixth and Main.

The growth in meat packing also brought about other ancillary developments: poultry packing, a good credit and banking system, a large labor force, skilled coopers for making barrels, etc. In 1870 Cincinnati became known as Porkopolis and stayed that way until better rail connections via St. Louis and Indianapolis, made Chicago the leader around 1885. But porking remained Cincinnati's largest industry, even in the 1920's when more than one million hogs were slaughtered in 1929.

By the 1870's the old rock salt process for curing and pickling ham and bacon, developed by Fosdick, had been replaced by mechanical refrigeration and later by electrical refrigeration. All agree that cold storage adds tenderness and gives meat a better flavor. I am reminded of my favorite New York steakhouse - Gallagher's on 53rd Street - where the first thing you see upon entering are rows of mouth-watering "goodies" in their glass refrigerator cases.

A description of the Porkopolis scene was written up in the book They Built a City and published by the Cincinnati Post in 1938:

"Hogs and cattle were driven through city streets to the abattoirs, prodded onto the death by rods and by the diver's hoarse sounds of "suke, suke." Winding up the long procession horse drawn wagons carried the "pick-ups", hogs too tired and fat to waddle further. . . At Brighton Landing on the Miami and Erie Canal

stevedores and boat crews sweated and sang while they loaded cargo - mostly meat. . .

"Overlooking the Canal at Central and Colerain Avenues was the old Brighton House, built to accommodate the livestock drivers who came to the Cincinnati market. On its tower stood the figure of a bull, symbol of the glory that was Brighton. The hotel was also headquarters for "gut riders" who went out to meet the drivers so they could obtain the gut fat for lard. They paid the owners 50¢ to \$1.00 a head."

"Nearly every evening at the Brighton House was gay. Drivers and owners, their pockets lined with notes paid them for live stock were good prey for professional gamblers. As many as 15 poker games went on in the noisy gaming rooms. In the concert hall on the floor below crowds danced with slow abandon to the Blue Danube and other popular tunes of the day. . .and there was another form of entertainment upstairs. . ."

But with the establishment of the Cincinnati Union Stockyards in 1871 the Avenue Hotel on Spring Grove Avenue became the inn of stockmen; the boisterous days of the Brighton House went the way of the Canal. Milton Schloss, ex-chairman of E. Kahn's Sons, Cincinnati's largest packer at 3241 Spring Grove Avenue recalled to me recently of the wild times of the old Avenue Hotel. It sounded pretty much like the Brighton House.

So much for the glory days of Porkopolis. Now, let's switch over to a century later, and preparations for Cincinnati's Bi-Centennial in 1988. In February of that year Mayor David Mann and Council appointed a Bi-Centennial Commission to make plans for that landmark event.

The Commission was charged with a three-fold purpose: 1) Organize and stage appropriate dramatic events throughout the year; 2) involve as many citizens as possible; and 3) leave something permanent for the

community when the Bi-Centennial year is over. (In 1988 the Centennial year, a commission of prominent citizens staged a notable celebration - an elaborate industrial exhibition, turning the Miami Canal in back of Music Hall into a scene from Venice, including gondoliers, but nothing permanent remained when the year was over.)

Originally, the Commission was composed of fifteen citizens, later enlarged to thirty-six, a cross-section of the community. One of its first acts was selecting an Executive Director. Out of 42 names submitted Rick Greiwe was chosen; a happy choice because Rick combined talent with enthusiasm. He had great ideas.

The Commission was expected to raise its own money for events - a preposterous idea. All it received from Council, its parent, was a little unused back room in City Hall for meetings and the promise to help pay operating expenses. It was a shaky start. With that lack of backing, some Commission members were ready to quit before it started. Nevertheless, plans got underway.

The permanent legacy project became the subject of heated debates, but in 1984 the Commission agreed that something on the Ohio River should be the focus. The river was Cincinnati's past, its present and very possibly its future. An old unused 22 acre scrap yard adjacent to the already constructed Serpentine Wall was available and was purchased by Charles Sawyer, ex-Secretary of Commerce, as a gift to the Commission. In return for his generosity the area was named Sawyer Point.

Plans were drawn for a combination historic and recreational park to be called, appropriately Bicentennial Park, but in keeping with the rivalry between the Cincinnati Park Board and the Cincinnati Recreation Commission, which was to operate the project, the Park Board vetoed the appellation "Park".

It claimed it legally owned the exclusive use of that name for its own use.

The Commission, of course, was frustrated but William S. Rowe, ex-Chairman of Fifth-Third Bank, the devoted Treasurer of the Commission and an ardent champion for preserving Cincinnati's historic connection to the Ohio River, came up with the idea of calling the area Bicentennial Commons. As he convincingly demonstrated, in New England the area "commons" was used as a space for all the people. His thinking won immediate approval and thus the name, a happy solution to a nasty situation.

It was an ambitious project - to make appropriate use of those 22 acres of riverfront property, with little encouragement or money from City Council. But starting in 1986, after plans had been drawn up with a great and generous gift of two million dollars from Procter and Gamble for a Performance Pavilion, the Commission began to raise the ten million needed, from corporations, foundations and individuals to make Bicentennial Commons first class, something the whole community would be proud of.

And the money was raised by a fund raising committee headed by William Liggett, ex-Chairman of the First National Bank (now U.S. Bancorporation).

At the time of the dedication, June 5, 1988, 350,000 people came to inspect every inch of the place - the geologic time-line, the artificial ice rink, the statue of Cincinnati, the Children's Adventure Playground, the personalized "bricks", the Lindner Tennis Courts, the Herschede Gardens, et al. At precisely 3 p.m. the U.S. Air Force's Golden Knights, a team of expert parachutists, fell through the sky one by one, landing near the Procter and Gamble Pavilion - the second last member carrying the American flag, and the last member a miniature flying pig, delivered on the podium to me as Chairman.

"Yes, the notorious 'Flying Pigs', the true stars of the show. There they were unveiled in all their splendor, perched atop one of the nation's premier environmental sculptures, standing guard in whimsical fashion. Whatever heated controversy had plagued their introduction into Cincinnati life, our porcine friends were now celebrities. They were the focal point of every photographer's lens."¹

How did all this come about?

City Ordinance 314 of October 1987 accepted a gift for an entrance sculpture to Bicentennial Commons that was approved by the city's Urban Design Review Board. Seventy artists and architectural firms were invited to compete for the design of the sculpture. Seven judges, three local and four from outside, narrowed the competition down to two finalists. Andrew Leicester, a Britisher from Birmingham England won out. The sculpture was to depict Cincinnati's history and its relationship to the Ohio River. The judges were impressed with Leicester's knowledge in this area.

The project was financed initially by a \$300,000 grant from the Greater Cincinnati Foundation and was coordinated by Dennis Barrie, Director of the Cincinnati Contemporary Arts Center. But it soon outgrew its initial plans. The sculpture turned out to be almost 300 feet long and was designed to be placed at the entrance of Bicentennial Commons. The initial contribution was not nearly enough to cover the cover of this ambitious project - not even half enough!

Like so many creative artists, Barrie and Leicester were long on design but short on money management. Though the Commission almost dumped it, the concept was so exciting that it raised another \$400,000, all from the private sector, so that the project could go forward and be installed in time for the June 1988 opening of the Bicentennial Commons.

The sculpture encompassed seventeen elements, and for the purpose of this paper it is necessary to list them with brief descriptions. If, by now, you have never been down there, go see for yourself.

1. Flood Column - 100 ft. tall. Bears high water mark for last three major floods, a brand marks the 1937 flood at 79.9 feet.

2. Ark

3. Riverboat Era - "Tall Stacks" Riverboat commerce contributed to rapid growth of the city.

4. Seven Hills of Cincinnati - Outlined and named on a brick wall.

5. Miami-Erie Canal - Half scale canal lock opposite 7 Hills Wall, illustrated dramatic 512 ft. rise necessary to reach Lake Erie.

6. Canal Lock - Walkway entrance to Sawyer Point.

7-8. Canal Art

9. Cincinnati Arch - Our city sits on the west end of a geologically anticline sedimentary rock.

10. Serpentine Steps - Symbol of Indian mounds.

11. The Source - Upper walkway. Steps lead to confluence of the Ohio River at Pittsburgh.

12-13. River Navigation - Locks and Dams.

14. Bridges - Bridge over Canal Lock - nine bridges, bridge columns resembling river boat smoke stacks. Winged pigs sit atop the stacks.

15-16. The Mouth - Water drains at Cairo, Illinois.

17. Porkopolis - A wall depicting pork assembly line is located along steps to upper walk. Cincinnati owes a great deal of its rapid growth and prosperity to the pig. Pork production plant in the 1860's - the modern day assembly line is born.

But how did the pigs achieve their prominence?

A model of the project was rendered for the public at the contemporary Arts Center, under Leicester's supervision. In late November of 1987 Christine Wolff, a reporter on The Enquirer, interviewed him. She asked him to explain the 17 elements and their relationship to Cincinnati history.

Leicester gladly complied but when he got to the "winged pigs" she interrupted him: "What about those red winged pigs on top of the smoke stacks; how do they fit in?" His reply, quoted in the Cincinnati Post November 24, 1987 explained: "I was charged by the Committee to make a work. It's my own personal creation. A winged animal on a column is a very important and traditional way to represent a 'gateway' in history" - pointing to an accompanying picture of the famous winged lions on a column above the Plaza San Marco at the entrance to the Grand Canal in Venice.

"But why red?", the reporter queried, "It makes them look so angry." "You may have a point there," answered Leicester. "But that was not the intent." After all, the pigs are only one of 17 elements, but Leicester's whimsical interview touched a nerve which began to reverberate around the city. It set off a firestorm, a public brouhaha the likes of which had never been witnessed in Cincinnati. The sculpture hadn't even been started; however, the pigs, each to be four feet tall weighing 200 pounds, had been ordered from a Wisconsin foundry.

All eyes were now focused on the pigs. Some began to call Cincinnati "that pig place." Milton Bortz, a cousin of councilman Arn Bortz, hated them. "Our image

as the Queen City should not be changed because some pigs died here a hundred years ago", he thundered. Mayor Charles Luken took up the chase. "The city risks a lot of embarrassment from people who come here from outside the area and see this as a symbol of the city. . ." He blamed the Bicentennial Commission. "They have done everything they can to stick pigs under our nose at every turn."

We explained to the mayor that the sculpture was chosen by an outstanding panel of judges. The Commission had nothing to do with the winning entry. But that didn't seem to make any difference. Councilman Steve Chabot joined in the chase. "Those pigs are a disgrace, they have to go," he chimed in.

Believe it or not matters went from bad to worse - most of the criticism coming from the west side of town. Toward the end of the year Council decided to have the Commission appear before it with the model of the sculpture in an open meeting at City Hall to get citizens views on the subject - in reality to defend or justify its choice.

The meeting took place January 12, 1988 at 10:30 a.m. The big Council room was packed, jammed downstairs, standing room only upstairs. The papers reported over 500 in attendance. The pig haters were mostly in the front rows. They got there early; their dislike was clearly evident; their veins stuck out on their necks!

But Dennis Barrie had persuaded hundreds of students from U.C.'s Design and Architectural School to come to the meeting. They were the pig lovers and carried banners and cardboard drawings to prove it.

The place was a mad house. The model of the sculpture, all 17 elements of it, had been trucked over from the Contemporary Arts Center and was placed in the center of the room. Councilman Steve Chabot opened the

meeting and called upon the Bicentennial Commission to prove its case.

William S. Rowe, ex-Chairman of Fifth Third Bank and Commission Treasurer was the initial spokesman. He started out by saying he didn't like the pigs, but that the sculpture was properly chosen and he would defend it. Boos from the "haters" Terry Riker, Commission member and pro-bono lawyer, sensed that stronger language was needed and he "took over" from Bill Rowe.

He spoke well and was making his points when an unprecedented occurrence took place. A lady reporter from WKRC sneaked into council chambers and took center stage. She cradled a little live pig in her arms. An uproar arose from the crowd. Then the real uproar occurred. The pig proceeded to do "poop" on the chamber's floor, and the crowd went wild!

It was all over. Steve Chabot couldn't control the crowd; the battle was over before it started. The meeting was suddenly adjourned. The design students cheered. Councilman Arn Bortz, previously no friend of the pig contingent appeared wearing a pig mask. The pig haters, including Chabot, slunk away.

The next day the Post editorialized "Let the Pigs Soar. Cincinnati's self-confidence and sense of humor came through with flying colors Tuesday. The occasion was rather silly, a City Hall hearing to debate whether winged pigs should adorn a Bicentennial sculpture. . ."

J. Vincent Aug, Jr., son of Literary Club member and an accomplished writer, composed the following:

ODE TO PIGASUS

I've heard a recent nasty rumor
Cincinnati has no sense of humor
Now the question's grown so big

Shall we adopt the flying pig
 Is creator Andrew Leicester
 Master artist or more jester
 I think his pig is more the charmer
 Than steamboats or the Roman farmer
 As with Bengals, Bearcats, Zoo small fry
 Let's welcome home these pigs that fly
 And whether or not you think it's funny
 It costs not a Sou of public money
 So loosen up Cincy; it's gay and witty
 Be a bit sassy, be a big city.
 Alas, if wrong we'll yet stand tall
 The work is grand the pigs are small.

And so the sculpture went forward; the red pigs
 were toned down from red to green, the last of the four
 was brought in by Coast Guard helicopter and put in
 place atop one of the smokestacks before a group of
 applauding well-wishers invited for the occasion. It
 was May 20, 1988.

Then came the June opening of Bicentennial
 Commons. The N.Y. Times July 10, 1988 commented on the
 opening: "The real victory though, is Cincinnati.
 Sometimes in danger of being on the prim side, the
 Queen City - former "Porkopolis" - pork packing capital
 of the western world, has shown the poise to
 acknowledge with a touch of whimsy the pigs in her
 past. We expect their jaunty image, high on the
 smokestacks of Leicester's steamboats to delight
 generations of visitors to Sawyer Point. . ."

During the Fall of 1988 thousands came down to
 Bicentennial Commons, principally to gawk at the pigs.
 On September 21, 1989 a non-profit waterfront
 development group gave the Flying Pig sculpture their
 top honor award. But after that the saga of the
 Cincinnati pigs began to get lost in history.

But it was revived on May 9, 1999, the first
 running of the Cincinnati Flying Pig Marathon. Two
 years before that, a Cincinnati Marathon was started,

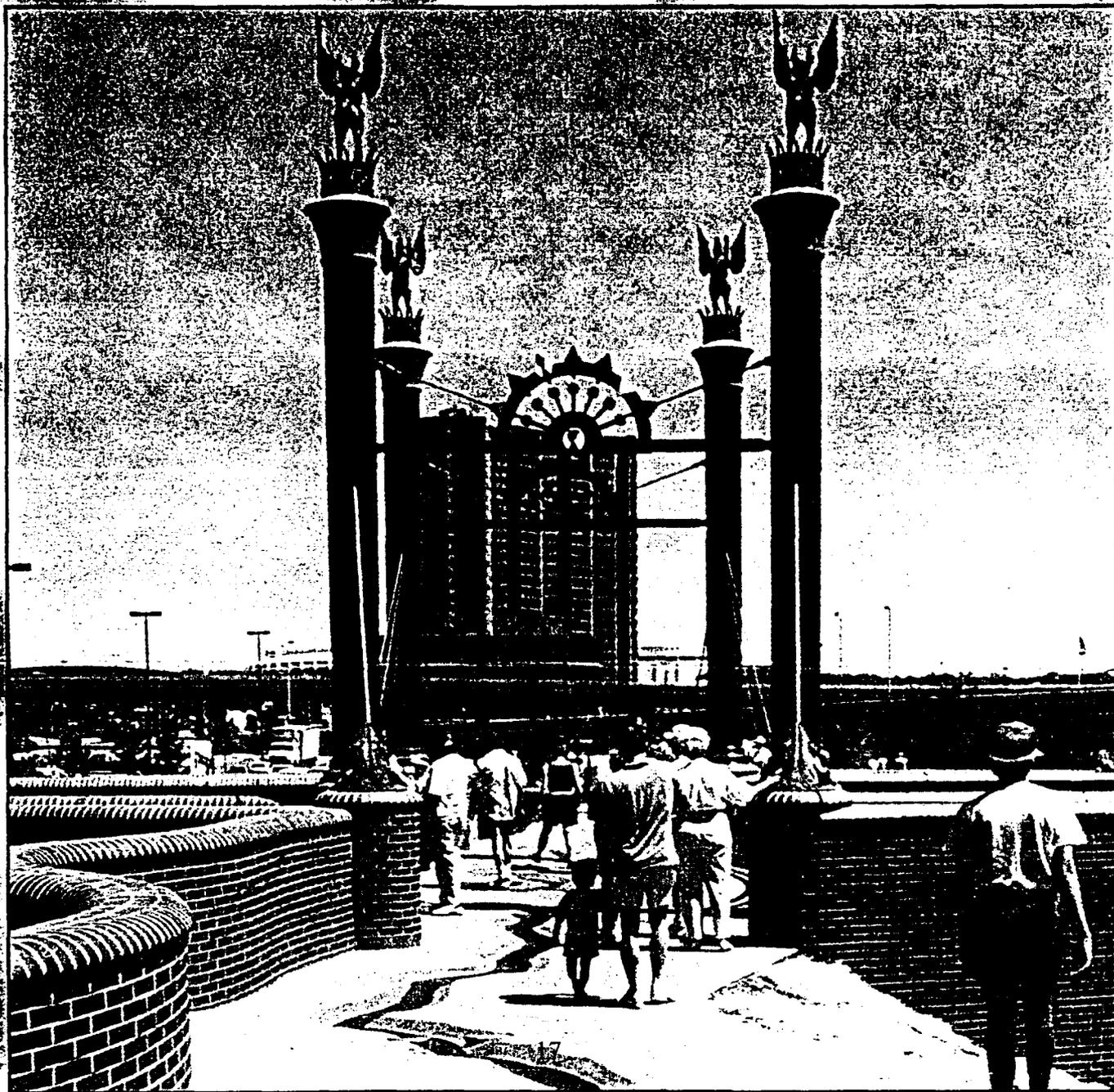
but there was little interest in it. However, Bob Coughlin, a local entrepreneur, intrigued by the story of the flying swine had a brainstorm. Instead of calling it the Cincinnati Marathon, he called it the Cincinnati Flying Pig Marathon. His idea took off like a rocket, the Flying Pigs were in sync with running. Over 6200 signed up for it and it has become a fixture in Cincinnati and well-known nationally. This year over 7500 are expected to enter.

Right on the heels of the Flying Pig Marathon, in early 2000, another "pig" event developed. "The Big Pig Gig", the brainchild of Tamara Harkavy and Melody Sawyer Richardson. It was modeled on a similar spectacle in Chicago where there were 320 cows on display. Art-Works, Inc., a local organization devoted to training programs and employment for youth in Cincinnati, wanted to put on a public art event celebrating Cincinnati's Porkopolis heritage and showcasing emerging and established local artists.

400 life-size colorfully painted fiberglass pigs in three different postures were created and auctioned off to sponsors. Half the money raised went to the sponsor's chosen charity and half to Art Works, Inc. to help accomplish its mission. The pigs were placed all over town and their novelty attracted large crowds. The highly successful pig auction raised a small fortune for 140 charities and job training.

The Flying Pig mystique is now embedded in Cincinnati culture and, yes, Cincinnati does have a sense of humor. PIGS GOTTA FLY! (Unless they get mad cow disease!)

THE "PIGS" AT BICENTENNIAL COMMONS



Photograph by J. Miles Wolf